

COMMENTS ON S. 1820

PROPOSING A "NATURAL DIVERSITY ACT"

By
Doak C. Cox, Director
University of Hawaii, Environmental Center
28 February 1978

S. 1820 proposes a "National Diversity Act" which would authorize the Secretary of the Interior to assist the states in establishing programs for the maintenance of natural diversity. The following comments on this bill reflect the great importance assigned by the Environmental Center of the University of Hawaii to the maintenance of natural diversity, but do not reflect an institutional position of the University as a whole.

The many regions of the United States represent, in themselves, a great diversity of natural conditions. Hawaii, as a whole, is unique among the states in its tropical-oceanic setting. It is also unique in the diversity of natural conditions that exist in a small area--diversity in climate, geology, and biology. In Hawaii also, the losses of natural diversity due to human activity have been extreme. Hawaii stands to gain as much as or more than any other state from a program to maintain at least examples of natural diversity, and from federal support of such a program.

The importance of such a program may be illustrated by mention of a very few examples of unusual and unique features and biological species that have disappeared or are now threatened.

Of the large number of species of birds that were found only in the Hawaiian Islands and described in the first century after Captain Cook's discovery of the Islands, only about a third now exist, and many of these are rare and endangered. An enormous number of plant species in the Islands, many of them endemic, are also rare and endangered. The living evidence of the principles demonstrated in the evolution of the biota of these once isolated Islands is, then, rapidly disappearing. It is axiomatic that the remaining species cannot be preserved individually, but can be saved only through the preservation of at least samples of the diverse ecosystems in which they developed and still live.

Salt Lake was a crater lake in a prominent volcanic cone on the Island of Oahu in whose flanks were preserved tree molds and plant fossils. Decades ago, the lake was freshened artificially; more recently, it was filled, and highway cuts have now destroyed large parts of the flanks.

The status of the threatened birds has been well documented; the Smithsonian Institution has listed rare and endangered plant species; and the State has catalogued unusual geologic features. Efforts at preservation have included the establishment of Natural and State Parks, wilderness areas, and marine sanctuaries. The program proposed in S. 1820 would neither conflict with nor supplant these efforts, but with its emphasis on natural diversity, would complement them.

- 2 -

University of Hawaii Environmental Center considers the proposal to establish a Natural Diversity program a highly desirable addition to the conservation programs of the nation and the states.



University of Hawaii at Manoa

Environmental Center
Crawford 317 • 2550 Campus Road
Honolulu, Hawaii 96822
Telephone (808) 948-7361

Office of the Director

February 28, 1978

Senator Spark Matsunaga
United States Senate
362 Russell Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Matsunaga:

S. 1820

I appreciate greatly receipt of your letter of 14 February and the enclosed copies of S. 1820, the Natural Diversity Act, and the floor statement of that bill.

With the commencement of the State Legislative Session, we have been heavily involved with commentary on proposed State environmental legislation, and, hence, have not responded as rapidly as I would have liked to your letter. I am, however, sending you, herewith, comments in support of S. 1820 which I hope will reach you in time for submission at the 1 March hearing of the Subcommittee on Public Lands and Resources and the Subcommittee on Resource Protection.

I would like to express our pleasure that you have co-sponsored this important and desirable legislation.

With aloha...

Sincerely,

Doak C. Cox
Director

DCC/ck

Enclosure: Comments on S. 1820